## Harmonic Convergence: Brotherly Opposites Kurt and David Andersen Search for the Right Pitch

One is a famous novelist, the other a rebel piano tuner **By Gendy Alimurung** *Wednesday, Mar 25 2009* 



If you are a famous, best-selling writer and influential editor who's just moved to Los Angeles to be the Visionary in Residence of a renowned design school (Art Center), and you're renting a historic house (a 1946 Rudolf Schindler) owned by your famous best-selling author friend (Susan Orlean), and you have a Peabody Award—winning radio show, what worlds are left to conquer?

Your family. That deep, bottomless well of psychodrama. Specifically, your older brother David, who shot you in the leg with a BB gun when you were a kid.

And so, on a recent brilliant afternoon, you travel to a cozy, aromatherapy candle—scented home in Mar Vista, where you will meet your brother David Andersen, and tape a segment of your radio show, *Studio 360 With Kurt Andersen*.

David won't just be talking about the myriad abuses he visited upon the adolescent Kurt but about his own grown-up craft. David is an extraordinary piano tuner.

"You look skinny, dude," David says, when his brother arrives.

"Would that it were true," Kurt says.
"I've gained weight since I've been in
Los Angeles."

The eight weeks he's been here make it the longest he's been anywhere but New York since he graduated from college. He's been having dinner out with people every week.

"No, you look good. You look healthy."

"It's the sun," Kurt says, as they look each other over.

The soundman attaches each of the brothers' microphones on their left ears.

"Why is it on the left?" asks David, spreading out comfortably on the sofa. "To pick up the secret darkshadow shit?"

Kurt admonishes his brother to turn off his cell phone, then a few minutes later his own cell rings.

"Physician heal thyself, bitch," David says. Then, to no one in particular, adds, "These elite Eastern snobs, man, who put classical music on their machines."

Each topic David raises could spawn its own separate radio program. Like the fact that Mozartplayed his pieces in a different ear from the one we in the modern day hear, a phenomenon known as temperament, which gets at the alignment between music and science. Or the fact that the rim of the piano is the part that *makes* it a piano. It is layer upon layer of varnished hardwood, bent into sinuous arcs.

"Then they send it off to forget for six months," says David, rather poetically. "It forgets it was a tree and remembers it's a piano."

Or the reason why Steinways are the 800-pound gorillas in the room of pianos — because artists became unofficial field reps for them over the years. Piano manufacturers, David explains, "befriend the artist, money follows the artist, acclaim follows the artist," an effect he calls the "psychoacoustic illusion."

The actual hulking gorilla of an instrument taking up significant real estate in the living room is David's gleaming black \$140,000 Steingraeber & Söhne. The piano is made in a castle in Bavaria. The brothers come up with an analogy for it: Steingraebers are to Steinways as Lamborghinis are to Mercedeses. It is the only manufactured piano David's worked on as a rebuilder that has ever scared him.

"Stand over here," he instructs, indicating the inward curve of the piano's belly. Bass rumbles up from inside the beast's gut. The strings vibrate like a colony of bees.

David is a strict aural tuner, meaning he doesn't use an electronic tuning device. His body is the tuning device, which prompts a question from Kurt: Will robots ever be able to do what he does?

"Robots can't do my job yet. It's coming. Maybe. This is a multitrillion-dollar package, this body we have, which is capable of picking up the custom inharmonicities that no machine will ever be able to pick up."

In his radio interview, Kurt goes after both the how and the why. In David's case, the details of how reveal the why.

"The hammers are a magic thing," he says. "They're the most worked-on felt in the world, bent and held and compressed. Each hammer has this little insane pearl of compressed energy at the core of the hammer." He clenches his fists. His face contorts. What appeals to him about Steingraebers is their darkness, their big huge sound.

Kurt starts to ask about cheap pianos. "We call them PSOs," David interrupts, "or, Piano Shaped Objects."

"Uh hmmm," Kurt murmurs in a faraway tone, the cup of coffee

sweetened with maple syrup balanced on his lap, forgotten.

Past Studio 360s have included visits with Annie Leibovitz, Fela Kuti and Spike Lee, but the show has not been afraid to veer toward stuff like Sweden's Large Hadron Collider particle accelerator and Chicano rock bands. The program's tag line is: "Get inside the creative mind." The show is essentially a forum for Kurt to air his curiosities in a weekly one-hour format.

Getting inside his own sibling's head is a first for Kurt on the show, though. And the walk down memory lane is a bit of a bumpy ride.

"I used to lie under the piano when Mom would play," David says. "It's the most expensive echo chamber in the world. Under there, it's psychedelic. It's like the Hall of the Mountain King."

"I would use it to stand on to get books I couldn't reach," says Kurt, and the radio-show producer practically drools at the perfection of it.

"And thus, character *is* destiny, as Heraclitus said," comments David, who rates their mother as a B+ amateur player with a repertoire of a dozen pieces she could "really kill" — some Chopin, Bach's Goldberg Variations and "Misty." "Did you actually listen when Mom played?"

"Well ... sure."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, I didn't become a musician, did I?"

Kurt never knew how and why his brother went from being a professional musician to piano technician. He wants to know how it happened. David shrugs. He tuned everybody's guitars and basses as a kid. He's been doing it now for more than 30 years.

They weren't close as kids in the house but made a warm relationship as adults. David was a bully as a kid because he was insecure, but he is fiercely proud of his sibling now. "I threw him off the stairs," David says of his younger brother.

"It wasn't throwing off stairs," Kurt corrects. "We were wrestling in the living room."

"The epic thing was shooting him in the leg with the BB gun. I remember the trajectory of the BB going out of the gun," David adds. The boys were playing a game, pretending to die.

"Do you have a *Matrix*-scene moment of the memory?" Kurt asks. "*My* memory of course is all focused on being shot."

The brothers walk into David's office. There are toy dinosaurs and a plastic shark and Raggedy Ann dolls on the shelves. But what surprises Kurt most is the copy of *TheNew* Yorker sitting on the coffee table. He is surprised to learn that his parents subscribed to it (especially since he was once a columnist at the magazine) ever since David was 7 years old. Memory is tricky. They stare at a photo pinned to the wall — Kurt as a teenager, senior year of high school. The brothers look nothing alike now: Kurt with the same curly brown mop he had as a kid, the same serious expression; David, frosty-haired and hawkish. "Graduation pictures like that, they always make me think of photos that run in newspapers," Kurt says. "Like after the fiery crash that killed 10 kids." He'd have been 17 in the photo. He is 54 now.

"Where are his books?" asks the *Studio 360* sound guy, scanning the shelves for Kurt's novels Heyday and Turn of the Century, or even his parody self-help book, Tools of Power: The Elitist Guide to the Ruthless Exploitation of Everybody & Everything.

"What is this?" David growls. "The fucking Inquisition? 'Where are his books."

Kurt is the straight and narrow. David is the ebullient rebel with a dark streak. Kurt is the magna cum laude Harvard grad; David, the sometime-rocker dropout. Each has come to epitomize the sensibility of the place they've lived in for the past 30 years: One brother is the apotheosis of East Coast reticence, the other of West Coast demonstrativeness. One primly shakes your hand. The other offers a hug.

David is a black sheep with a generous spirit. How many times have clients insisted they can't hear the tiny gradations of sound he takes in? "I can't, I can't,' they say. If they think they can't, they can't. I show them that they can, and this light comes on. Wow! Bingo! So quit telling yourself you can't hear it."

The black sheep/white sheep dichotomy breaks down further on closer scrutiny. They correct each other as they speak, pushing for greater rhetorical accuracy. To the question of whether or not David was the scapegoat, Kurt says, "No, no, no, not scapegoat. Scapegoat implies no blame to the goat." Kurt remembers David was funny, charismatic, popular, had girlfriends. David counters that academics was the meat and potatoes. The portrait that emerges is of precocious, competitive siblings, each conscious of their respective talents, like a family out of Salinger.

In a bit, the group moves to the garage-turned—piano atelier, where pianist Tamir Hendelman is tapping out a melody on a 1953 Steinway that David worked on for 1,000 hours. "Tamir is one of my top five all-time pianists ever," says David. "And I thought about it before I said that."

The guy with the microphone circles them. Hendelman says that when he sits at one of David's pianos, he feels freer than with any other. That his fingers glide on a passage and stuff comes out of him that wouldn't normally come out. His floppy brown poet hair bobs as he plays a jaunty number he wrote for his daughter.

Other pianists come into the atelier and get insane soft tones,

cascading Debussy stuff. Tones David's never heard before. That's the real reason he tunes pianos, he says. To hear the geniuses play.

A classical pianist plays Mozart the minute he sits at a piano. A jazz pianist explores the ranges, tinkles out random chords, tests the darks, the lights, seeing how sweet and low the instrument can get. Hendelman is of the jazz school, so if it doesn't wind up on the metaphorical cuttingroom floor, perhaps on Kurt's radio show you'll hear him riffing on this exquisitely tuned piano.

Pianists, Hendelman explains, can't take their instrument with them when they travel, as other session musicians do. The way a cellist might book a seat for his cello on an airplane. That's why the greatest pianists always have a deal with the manufacturer to provide a suitable instrument at each venue — it's consistency for the artist, and smart marketing for the company.

"I get it," Kurt says.

"He has to dance with whatever skanky whore shows up." David grins. Once, when he was feeling smug, having just listened to Hendelman play a concert on a piano he'd tuned, David said, "Yeah, you must have to play some really nasty pianos in your career, right Tamir?"

Hendelman simply answered in his modest way, "Well, whoever shows up, I just make love to."

Even some weird transvestite, David adds now.

"Well, maybe not that," Hendelman concedes, and the brothers Andersen laugh.